

Collaborating and Coordinating with Employers

by Elaine Katz and Richard Luecking

A contemporary look at employers' views of disability and disability employment programs to move people with disabilities into the labor market can offer clear guidance as to what best characterizes effective disability/employer collaborations. This brief examines the evolving relationship between disability employment initiatives and employers, and uses case illustrations of selected collaborations to demonstrate these characteristics. It also highlights the implications that these collaborations have for effectively formulating broad-scale promotion of disability workforce investment initiatives.

Introduction

The success of any workforce investment initiative is contingent on the active participation of employers. This is true both for generic, mainstream systems, such as One-Stop Career Centers under the workforce investment system, as well as programs and systems that target specific populations, such as state vocational rehabilitation agencies and other disability employment providers. The pursuit of effective and sustainable partnerships between disability employment programs and employers, however, has historically been a challenging one. A primary reason has been the traditional focus of disability employment programs on “supply-side” activities — such as preparing and training job seekers — without a concomitant focus on “demand-side” needs — such as meeting the operational challenges faced by employers.¹

There is, however, growing recognition of the essential need for both sides of the workforce investment equation to work in a more purposeful and collaborative way. To date, disability employment initiatives have failed to boost the employment rates of people with disabilities, as is reflected in successive national surveys.² Yet, on the employer side, the impending exit of large numbers of aging workers and other demographic factors are likely to be an impetus for employers to positively engage all segments of the prospective workforce, including people with disabilities.³

There is evidence that employers of all industries and all sizes have benefited from hiring people with disabilities. Additionally, there is no question that people of all disability categories with varied levels of employment support needs have contributed, and continue to successfully contribute, to employers' enterprises. Nonetheless, the seemingly intractable high unemployment rates of people with disabilities are evidence that such successes are not yet the norm. Both employers and disability employment initiatives would benefit from refined and expanded collaboration.

This brief illustrates key research findings, outlines existing strategies and practices that are advancing the concept of disability and business collaboration, and provides resources that further illuminate effective strategies and examples of these collaborations.

What Research Tells Us About Employer Collaborations

The longstanding challenge to improve employer participation in disability employment initiatives has spawned a number of research studies about what influences and motivates employers to partner with programs and services that represent job seekers with disabilities. Research has found that employers' views of disability have evolved considerably over the past several decades. Legislation, policy, and practice have increasingly created conditions favorable to collaborations between employers and disability employment programs. There is now ample evidence to suggest that employers, under favorable and mutually beneficial conditions, are willing to actively participate in disability employment initiatives. Specifically, research shows that:⁴

- Employers express generally positive and affirmative attitudes toward workers with disabilities.
- Large employers are more likely to actively recruit people with disabilities than smaller companies; however, employers of all sizes generally want the same thing from an employee — satisfactory job performance and productivity that contributes positively to a company's bottom line.⁵
- Employers' views about disability tend to positively change with exposure. That is, employers with prior contact with people with disabilities tend to hold more favorable views toward workers with disabilities than those employers without previous contact.
- Under conditions of available and competent support from disability employment programs, employers are willing to hire people with disabilities who not only require extensive initial training and follow-up support, but who may also need considerations for customized or restructured task assignment.
- With respect to people with typically stigmatized disabilities, such as intellectual and psychiatric disabilities, employers have consistently been more positive about these workers when they receive help identifying and implementing appropriate accommodations and supports.
- Employers consistently identify two factors in their success with workers with disabilities — the help of partner organizations experienced in disability issues, and the ability of these organizations to recognize employers' operational needs.⁶

Regardless of job seeker category, studies consistently show that employer motivations for participating in disability employment programs and initiatives are fairly straightforward. Employer willingness to hire individuals represented by such programs is ultimately influenced by convenience of access to these job seekers, the qualified skills and experience of the job seeker, the job seeker's productivity and benefits to an employer's bottom line, and competent service from employment service programs and professionals.⁷ This suggests not only a positive climate for collaborations between disability employment initiatives and employers, but also some directions for crafting these collaborations. Examples of current disability/employer partnership activity serve as illustrations of the potential of close and constructive collaborations.

Contemporary Strategies and Practices in Employer Collaborations

Emerging employer and human resources perspectives often reflect a sophisticated understanding of disability. For example, some employers and employer groups are beginning to make a credible case for how company profitability requires the effective inclusion, accommodation, and management of previously marginalized workers, including those with disabilities. The emergence of the Business Leadership Network, an employer-led, peer-to-peer membership movement to promote employment of people with disabilities, is an example of this business viewpoint.⁸

What is a Business Leadership Network?

The Business Leadership Network (BLN) was established in 1994 through the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities with a national advisory board chaired by the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The BLN was established with the concept that business understands business best. The U.S. BLN is the national organization that supports development and expansion of BLN affiliates across the United States. A BLN is a business-**led**, business-**driven**, and business-**sustained** entity that is:

- Dedicated to promoting the employment of people with disabilities and educating employers about disability issues; and
- Committed to assisting businesses in the recruitment, hiring, training, and retention of people with disabilities.

What a Business Leadership Network is NOT:

- A provider of direct services to individuals with disabilities
- Focused on setting policy or guiding policy initiatives

Sample Activities of a BLN:

- Increase awareness among employers of benefits of hiring people with disabilities
- Provide networking opportunities, best practices, and educational sessions for companies
- Provide an avenue for business leaders to communicate with disability organizations about hiring trends and workforce needs

As of 2009, there are 53 BLN affiliates operating in 31 states, including the District of Columbia, representing more than 5,000 employers across the nation.

A host of initiatives that can provide insights about collaborating and coordinating with employers has recently emerged. The strategies used by these initiatives include innovative public/private partnerships, individual company-driven undertakings, and industry-driven efforts to promote collaboration. Effective strategies are reflected in recruitment and hiring, training and promotion, corporate culture, workplace flexibility, and targeted partnerships and collaborations, as illustrated in the selected examples highlighted below.

Recruitment and Hiring

State vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs and their community rehabilitation providers are forming specific initiatives with cooperating companies to promote the recruitment and hiring of people with disabilities. Some state VR agencies have corporate account representatives that offer a single point of contact for employers. One example of a concerted public/private partnership initiative is the Employers Partners Team, comprised of representatives of 12 VR agencies in the southeastern region of the United States. These state agencies include the general and blind/visually impaired VR programs in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Since 2000, corporate forums have been held at regional employment conferences that bring together vocational rehabilitation and companies. As a result, contacts with various companies are being leveraged across states. For instance, Lowe's, Shaw Manufacturing, Suntrust Bank, Manpower, Walmart, The Home Depot, and Unum Provident have had success in employing people

Tennessee's Corporate Connections

Corporate Connections is an initiative of the Tennessee Division of Rehabilitation Services in partnership with the University of Tennessee's Center of Disability and Employment. Corporate Connections account representatives work with Tennessee employers to access resources that work to successfully recruit, hire, train, and support both new and existing employees with disabilities. Corporate Connections links employers with qualified job candidates and provides follow-up services throughout the employment process. Account representatives provide area businesses with training, consultation, and technical assistance in such areas as:

- Disability awareness education,
- Job accommodation and accessibility,
- Community services and resource professionals, and
- Public relations and business network opportunities.

with disabilities in several southeastern states in which they operate by linking with local VR agencies. Another notable example of targeted recruiting is Walgreens, the nation's largest pharmacy chain, which has partnered with various disability employment service providers to recruit a high percentage of people with disabilities in its Anderson, South Carolina distribution operation. Recruitment partners with Walgreens include the Anderson County Disability & Special Needs Board and the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department.

Training and Promotion

In 2001, Booz Allen Hamilton, a strategy and technology consulting firm, founded the Emerging Leaders Program, which places college students with disabilities into internships within the company to develop skills pertinent to the industry. Each year, interns are competitively selected from applicants around the nation to spend the summer in the company's McLean, Virginia headquarters. The program not only provides students with work experience in the private sector, but also couples that experience with leadership development through an annual two-day conference in collaboration with non-profit organizations and federal agencies. Recently, Booz Allen Hamilton transitioned the Emerging Leaders Program into the National Business and Disability Council in order to expand the program to more students and companies. Today, the program assists corporations across the United States in not only considering diversity and inclusion in their hiring and promotion practices, but also helps companies in finding qualified young workers. A number of notable companies have joined Booz Allen Hamilton in the National Business and Disability Council, including Caterpillar, Inc., United Parcel Service, and Motorola. Another organization that partners with companies to recruit college interns with disabilities is Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (www.cosdonline.org), an organization that includes university and employer members so that students and companies are conveniently linked.

Corporate Culture

Some companies have in place an already established inclusive work environment that supports the hiring, retention, and promotion of people with disabilities. As seen in soon-to-be released research on corporate culture and inclusive employment support by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, preliminary findings suggest that such companies exist, and that corporate policies (including a visible organizational commitment to disability issues such as the inclusion of disability in an organization's written diversity policy) along with reinforcing human resource practices and managerial behaviors are critical to the establishment and maintenance of an inclusive work environment.⁹

Other companies, however, have found that targeted collaboration with community-based organizations results in adoption of an inclusive workplace culture that promotes disability employment. Habitat International is one such firm.¹⁰ Habitat International actively collaborates with state vocational rehabilitation agencies and local disability employment service providers to recruit workers with disabilities, resulting in a workforce with a high percentage of employees with disabilities. This has created a culture that accepts and accommodates diversity in its workforce, while at the same time expecting and encouraging high levels of productivity. As a result, the company is simultaneously “disability friendly” and profitable.

Workplace Flexibility

Employer flexibility is on the rise. A 2008 national study of employers by the Families and Work Institute reported that almost 80% of employers with 50 or more workers now offer flexibility in arrival and departure time, almost 50% allow at least some employees to move from full- to part-time work and back again, and companies that allow at least some telecommuting are increasing significantly.¹¹ For example, CIGNA Group Insurance offers telecommuting arrangements for workers with disabilities living in remote locations or to those who cannot return to their former jobs due to disability.

This growing trend in increasing workplace flexibility is likely to allow greater numbers of people with disabilities to have their working conditions customized for their individual circumstances and accommodation needs. Furthermore, some companies are learning to meet operational needs through the flexible assignment of work tasks to individuals with unique accommodation needs. Companies that have partnered with disability employment initiatives and that have carved, restructured, or created work tasks in such a manner report that increase in sales or more efficient company operations is possible.¹² Such customized employment approaches are very effective when collaborations with employers feature a negotiated relationship between individual job seeker abilities and discrete business needs of the employer. The trend toward more flexible work environments and flexible work tasks as reflected in customized employment opportunities enables people with disabilities to make important workplace contributions.

Convening Partners for Recruitment and Hiring: A Customized Employment Approach in Montgomery County, Maryland

The essence of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act is the promotion of partnerships so that local One-Stop Career Centers can offer, under one roof, an expanded array of coordinated and personalized services to individuals needing assistance to obtain employment. One-Stop Career Centers are often well situated to convene both employment service providers and employers for mutual collaboration.

At **MontgomeryWorks**, the One-Stop Career Center in Montgomery County, Maryland, over 30 different partnering agencies have been involved in some way in the coordination of services and employer recruitment that have ultimately benefited numerous job seekers with disabilities, including those with extensive need for support to find and keep jobs. Partners at MontgomeryWorks are able to:

- Share job leads through a job posting listserv;
- Access the contacts of the business services unit of MontgomeryWorks, which regularly canvases the business community for job openings;
- Participate in regular employer recruitment events;
- Team with the Disability Program Navigator to facilitate job seeker access to One-Stop services and other resources; and
- Collaborate with career specialists who are experienced in helping job seekers with significant disabilities obtain customized employment opportunities with local businesses.

Targeted Partnerships and Collaborations

In the mid-1990s, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in Ohio began a significant diversity initiative to attract and retain the entire spectrum of the community's potential workforce, especially people with disabilities. To get such a project underway, Cincinnati Children's Hospital sought disability employment service providers with which it could develop a trusting relationship, including the Great Oaks Institute of Technology & Career Development and the Ohio Rehabilitation Commission. The partnership resulted in the establishment of Project SEARCH, a comprehensive employment, job retention, and career advancement service for people with disabilities. On-site job retention personnel identify available positions, fill them with productive workers with disabilities, and ensure that these employees succeed in various support jobs in the hospital. All partners receive significant tangible benefits. The hospital gains a host of workers whose training, support, and supervision is targeted to its employer needs. The disability employment service agency partners receive a direct link with many quality job opportunities for the job seekers they represent. And workers with disabilities find jobs in the community with living wages and important benefits. The success of Project SEARCH in its original Cincinnati location has led to replication in medical facilities throughout the nation.

Shaping the Future of Employer Partnerships

Legislation and successful partnership practices that have taken place across the United States have created an environment where many employers are more amenable to hiring people with disabilities. In fact, many are assertively pursuing the idea. Ultimately, it is becoming recognized that company hiring decisions are less likely to be influenced by the presence or absence of a disability than by the potential contribution by a job candidate to the company. For state agencies and community-based providers looking to assist people with disabilities to enter the workforce, it is important to understand the following factors, for they suggest a potential new paradigm for collaborations with employers. These factors include:

- Fostering a deeper and improved understanding of business operational needs by disability employment service entities and marketing that competence to employers;
- Based on that deep understanding of business needs, promoting the hiring of skilled employees with disabilities as a way to meet those employer needs and expectations, moving beyond simply promoting good corporate citizenship;
- Increasing opportunities for industry-based skill training for clients with disabilities, such as internships, on-the-job learning, and sector-based career ladders; and
- Focusing on the mutual benefits of strong collaborations and partnerships between disability employment initiatives and employers.

A critical issue for workforce development and disability employment service programs is to understand the importance of offering an effective and convenient service to employers — access to qualified workers — rather than having to convince employers to hire job candidates with disabilities. Clearly, if the goal of employer collaborations is to link job seekers with jobs, then partnerships and collaborations should be constructed so as to be attractive to those who have the jobs — the employers. The research and the examples provided support this notion. The success of employer collaborations, therefore, is more about addressing demand-side needs than it is about promoting disability employment.

Useful Resources

Key aspects of collaborating and coordinating with employers are highlighted in the examples cited above. Further information about examples cited in this brief, as well as information about similar initiatives and critical facets of effective collaborations, can be found at:

The *U.S. Business Leadership Network* (www.usbln.org) is a national business organization representing more than 5,000 employers in more than 50 affiliates in over 30 states to promote the business imperative for hiring people with disabilities.

The mission of the *Job Accommodation Network* (www.jan.wvu.edu) is to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities by providing employers, employment providers, people with disabilities, their family members, and other interested parties with information on job accommodations, entrepreneurship, and related subjects.

The *Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention* (www.worksupport.com), in conjunction with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Society of Human Resource Management, and other business groups, studies those supports that are most effective for assisting individuals with disabilities maintain employment and advance their careers.

The *Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center* (www.adata.org) is a national network of 10 regional centers that provide the most complete and up-to-date information, referrals, resources, and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act to businesses, employers, governmental entities, and individuals with disabilities.

The *National Business and Disability Council* (www.business-disability.com) is a resource for employers seeking to integrate people with disabilities into the workplace and companies seeking to reach them in the consumer marketplace.

The *Workforce Recruitment Program* (www.dol.gov/odep/programs/workforc.htm) is a recruitment and referral program that connects federal and private-sector employers with highly motivated postsecondary students with disabilities who are eager to prove their abilities in the workplace through summer or permanent jobs.

Walgreens (www.walgreensoutreach.com) provides information to help potential employees at its distribution centers understand what work will be like at the Anderson, South Carolina location. The site incorporates audio messages, photos, video, and a large-print text option to depict jobs and worklife at the Anderson distribution center.

Project SEARCH (www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/p/search/) provides employment and educational opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center located in Cincinnati, Ohio. The program, which has been replicated in other locations nationally, is dedicated to workforce development that benefits the individual, community, and workplace.

Habitat International (www.habitatint.com) is a private artificial grass and indoor-outdoor carpet firm located in Chattanooga, Tennessee. It provides employment opportunities for hard-to-place individuals, including adults with disabilities.

The *U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy* provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities. Further information on employer perspectives on the employment of people with disabilities, inclusive employment practices, and customized employment can be found at www.dol.gov/odep.

End Notes

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About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

Consortium Partners

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